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# How Important Is Battlefield Archeology?

When a family completes a visit to a national Civil War battlefield, they rarely question the accuracy of what they have seen. Instead, they happily accept the story presented by brochures, tour guides, interpretive trails, and rangers. Sometimes distinctive physical landmarks — such as a house, river, road, or earthwork that is clearly a landmark from the battle — fortify this confidence. Perhaps there are also monuments on the field that were erected long ago by veterans who fought there and that seem to say, "we were here." Often though, a battlefield park has none of these. Rather, the only physical evidence available to the visitor is the information center and the waysides along roads and trails created to tell the story of the battle.

As a result of many studies conducted since pioneering work at the Little Bighorn Battlefield in the 1980s,[1] archeologists have come to agree that the visitor's confidence in the accuracy of their Civil War battlefield tour may, in many cases, be at least slightly misplaced. Prior to this study, archeologists confined their work on battlefields to traditional excavation around buildings, earthworks, or graves. At Little Bighorn, site of the most famous of all Indian Wars confrontations, archeologists worked with volunteers to use metal detectors to find and document artifacts and their placement over large expanses of the battlefield.

*Detector line. Volunteers equipped with metal detectors systematically scan the battlefield.*

Because of the success of the Little Bighorn study, archeologists have come to embrace the entire battlefield, regardless of size, as an important subject for study.[2] Insights important for the proper management of battlefields and for their interpretive development or redevelopment are generally forthcoming from such studies, regardless of whether they focus on National Park Service properties, state or local historical sites, or sites held entirely in private hands.

### *Seeing the Whole Battlefield*

Our Civil War battlefields can be said to consist of three essential components: 1) documents and oral history accounts, 2) physical remains of the battle, and 3) the modern landscape on which, many years ago, the battle was fought (at some locations this includes memorial elements such as monuments or markers). None of these alone is sufficient to provide an understanding of the battlefield. Archeologists argue, based on a growing body of case study, that all three must be considered in the management and interpretation of a battlefield of the Civil War.

A few monuments, memories still told or written down as stories, and first hand reports, letters, diaries, and memoirs are what planners of most of our battlefield parks had to work with when they transformed land into a battlefield park. An arduous process of detailed historical research and analysis was typically coupled with a careful study of the land on which the battle was known or thought to have occurred. Modern intrusions were eradicated, park roads constructed, waysides and walking trails built, cannons placed, and visitor centers with interpretive displays erected. This process imposed an interpretation of the battle on the modern landscape and created a landscape that is itself an interpretation. It represented the best fit between the available evidence and the modern landscape. At some battlefields this process has been done more than once, resulting in markedly different visitor experiences.

Because of the difficulty of accessing the widely dispersed physical remains of the battle until the relatively recent past, the process of

*Enfield pattern Minie balls. Unfired specimen mark the location of a soldier who dropped or discarded them during the battle, whereas the fired specimen less precisely mark the location of fallen soldiers.*

managing and developing Civil War battlefields has historically relied very little on the second of the three battlefield components reviewed above: the physical remains. Physical remains focus on the armaments — predominantly bullets and artillery projectiles — hurled back and forth by opposing troops. Here a distinction exists between ammunition that was fired in battle and that which may have been dropped, discarded, or lost during the battle. Unfired ammunition is important in that it marks the location (if but for a moment in time) of the soldier who dropped or discarded it. Fired ammunition, on the other hand, marks less directly the location of a perhaps fallen soldier at some point in the event.

In addition to ammunition, there are things that occur in lesser quantities: fragments of equipment, such as trigger guards and canteen spouts, and personal items, such as harmonicas and coins. Like the unfired ammunition, the placement of these items on the battlefield marks the location of an individual participant in the battle.

In some cases, these artifacts can be attributed to U.S. or Confederate usage, although this is difficult given the realities of supply during the Civil War. In even more unusual circumstances, artifacts can be attributed to specific regiments or companies. When this occurs, the ease with which documents can be correlated with a specific place on the modern landscape increases substantially.

The archeologist, through careful study, can access information represented by physical remains.[3] A systematic survey of the suspected battlefield will uncover battle-related artifacts that can be properly collected and their locations precisely recorded with modern surveying instruments. Information on the artifacts and their placement can then be used to develop detailed maps of the physical residue of the battle; and these can be examined for patterns that address questions of the location of the battle and its key elements, the nature of the fighting, and the progression of the event.

The first pattern of interest is the most general: where artifacts are, as opposed to where they are not. This most general pattern speaks to the limits of the battle (different from park boundaries). Once the limits are understood, the archeologist examines the findings for patterns that may be used for interpreting the placement of battle events on the landscape, the nature of the fighting at these locations, and the overall progression of the fighting. This information has specific pertinence for the management and interpretive development of our Civil War battlefields.

### *Mine Creek as an Example*

An example of the successful use of archeology to develop pertinent management and interpretive information is Mine Creek Battlefield, operated by the Kansas State Historical Society.[4] The Battle of Mine Creek was fought on October 25, 1864, between Major General Sterling Price's rear guard of 7,500 cavalry and Major General Alfred Pleasanton's advance cavalry of 2,500.[5] The Confederates were posted north of Mine Creek on both sides of an alternate route of the Fort Scott Road. The Confederates were protecting the rear of a long wagon train whose head, along with eight pieces of artillery and the balance of the Confederate Army, were already miles to the south.

Based on research by local historian Lumir Buresh,[6] the Kansas State Historical Society purchased 280 acres of land in Linn County, KS, for creation of a battlefield park. Buresh's interpretation of the battle had placed most of the significant troop positions and actions within the 280 acres. After being delayed for many years, a new initiative to develop the land was begun in the late 1980s. An archeological reconnaissance of the 280 acres was conducted in 1989 to determine if any artifacts related to the battle remained that might assist in the development efforts or that might serve as museum exhibits.[7]

This initial study found substantial evidence of the event within the 280-acre tract. In addition, however, the study showed ample evidence that the battlefield extended well beyond the limits of the State-owned land particularly

toward the east and north. While the artifact distribution dropped off to virtually nothing on the western edge of the property, it did not diminish on the northern and eastern boundaries. Further, Buresh showed the Fort Scott Road used during the battle (which was the approximate centerline of the battle) as running through the center of the State-owned property. No archeological evidence for a road in this location was found, but clear evidence for a road used during the battle was found along the eastern edge of the property south of Mine Creek. This evidence consisted of swales visible on the modern landscape and an associated alignment of battle-related artifacts. This road crossed on to private property just north of Mine Creek.[8]

Further archeological study of adjacent private land was set into motion by these discoveries. Work in 1990 and 1991 covered lands to the west, east, and north of the State-owned parcel and showed conclusively that the battle covered a much larger area than had previously been understood. The road identified in the 1989 study could not be followed very far north of Mine Creek, but its projected route was indeed close to the centerline of the distributions of artifacts documented north of the creek. The center of the battlefield was in reality in the vicinity of the eastern edge of the State-owned property.[9]

In addition to being larger than previously thought, the archeology also showed that the initial Confederate line and the main engagement was much further north of Mine Creek than previously thought. Several converging lines of evidence were important in reaching this conclusion, but the evidence for artillery fire was pivotal. U.S. artillery arrived too late to figure in the fighting, but the Confederate artillery was a key element in its line of defense.

The Buresh interpretation had the Confederate artillery posted immediately north of Mine Creek within the main Confederate line. Artillery ammunition was found, however, concentrated well north of the creek — in fact it was well north of the northern boundary of the State-owned property. While artillery projectiles can travel a considerable distance, the evidence included a concentration of canisters[10] that have a relatively short effective range of roughly 300 meters, though they would certainly travel further before grounding.[11]

Nonetheless, the canister was found some 1,600 meters north of Mine Creek and beyond a rise of ground that would have hidden the target from the gunners who fired this canister had they been posted at the creek. It is more reasonable to presume that the cannon were some 300 to 600 meters from where the canister was found. This places the Confederate line somewhere near the northern boundary of the State-owned property and over 1,000 meters north of the creek.[12]

This conclusion was supported by other evidence to show that the initial engagement of U.S. troops with the Confederate line was at best at the northern boundary of the State-owned property and on private lands to the east. It is easily conceivable that the line was even further north of this location. This area north of the State-owned property is in fact where the density of artifact finds was the greatest, suggesting this is where the most intense fighting occurred.[13]

The State-owned land, as well as private land directly to the east, presented evidence for the fighting after the U.S. attack had pushed through the initial Confederate line. This includes the increasingly disorganized fighting north of Mine Creek that resulted in the capture of some 900 Confederate soldiers, 2 Confederate generals, all 8 pieces of Confederate artillery, and many wagons of the Confederate train.[14]

These examples illustrate some of the major conclusions reached about the Battle of Mine Creek from a careful study of physical remains of this event. In general, the major lesson from the archeological study of Mine Creek concerns scale. The battle was found to cover a substantially larger area than had been indicated by the Buresh

*A volunteer carefully searches the ground at Mine Creek for a battle-related artifact might help tell the story of the fighting.*

*An archeologist behind a total station records the precise location of a battlefield find.*

interpretation. This showed that this interpretation, and the interpretation implied by the original State purchase of battlefield lands, was flawed in terms of scale. Without physical evidence or non-ambiguous landscape features to work with, it was possible to place the historically recorded battle events within a much smaller area than was actually the case. The physical evidence has served to anchor or reconnect the historical accounts of the battle to the modern landscape.

In a similar fashion, the placement of specific elements of the action within the newly defined battlefield boundaries was modified drastically from the earlier interpretation that placed the Confederate line immediately north of Mine Creek. The physical evidence clearly argues that the Confederate line was substantially north of the creek. Here, the physical evidence seems to serve to shatter what may be 20th-century concepts of scale in favor of those that were more familiar to the soldiers who fought at Mine Creek. Perhaps due to the ease with which we move from place to place via automobiles and paved roads, accounts that describe troops posted at Mine Creek seem to say to us today that they were immediately north of the creek. To the Civil War soldier, even those on horseback, being posted at Mine Creek certainly had a much larger geographic meaning than it does to us today.

Among other values, therefore, the archeological record serves to reconnect written and other records and our interpretation of these records with a landscape that is much changed from the moment in time when a Civil War battle was fought. This value alone makes the archeologist's work on our Civil War battlefields of great importance for the management and interpretation of these resources.

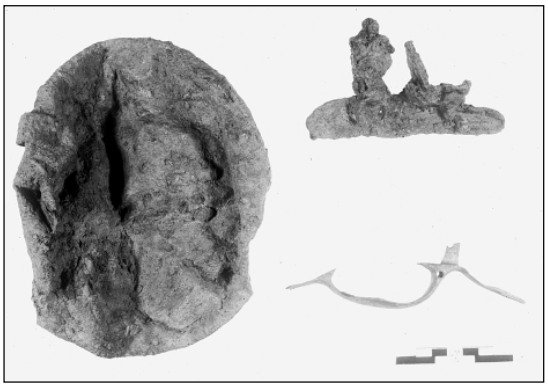
### *Importance of Battlefield Archeology*

Mine Creek is but one of numerous case studies that speak to the same conclusion: approaches to the management and/or interpretive development of Civil War battlefields that have not taken advantage of archeological studies of the battlefield itself may be seriously inadequate, if not flawed. Archeological evidence is obviously the best means to determine where remains of the battle actually exist and, therefore, the location of grounds hallowed by intense fighting. Whether the goal is to protect resources on private lands through regulatory actions or to manage construction or interpretive development on long-existing battlefield parks or parks under initial development, knowing where physical remains are located is of obvious importance in avoiding their damage.

At Mine Creek, for example, the State thought they had purchased management control over the entire battlefield. Archeological research taught us lessons of scale at this place, but this insight is guiding new efforts to acquire the remainder of the battlefield lands so they can be properly managed and interpreted.

The interpretive value of archeology can obviously be profound. Had the site of Mine Creek been developed when the State first purchased it, the archeology would have shown that this interpretive development was flawed and needed rethinking to reflect the new understanding of the scale of this event. Archeology can also have a profound impact on other areas of interpretation especially regarding the nature of the fighting. These insights can impact not only locations, but also the story that is told about what happened there.

There are those that would argue that knowing precise locations and having new insights into the conduct of a battle is of little importance. They argue that regardless of where



*Flintlock, canteen, and trigger guard found along an abandoned road at Mine Creek mark the route of the Confederate retreat.*

you place the trails or markers, the public still sees only grass and woods, and regardless of the nature of the fighting, the outcome was still the same. What is wrong, they would ask, with telling the public that the entire battle of Mine Creek occurred on 280 acres and letting the lands that we now know were part of the battlefield remain in productive agricultural use and in private hands?

The answers to these questions are of course as individual as those who may hear them. The importance of battlefield preservation seems, though, to be almost inherent in the movement to save these places that started as soon as the smoke cleared in the 1860s and that continues unabated to this day. If we are to preserve and interpret places from the Civil War, it is important that we do so honestly with the benefit of the full range of information available: the oral and written documents, the archeological records, and the landscape itself.

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**Notes**

1 Douglas D. Scott, Richard A. Fox, Jr., Melissa A. Connor, and Dick Harmon, *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

2 Charles M. Haecker and Jeffrey G. Mauck, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto, Historical Archaeology of the U.S. — Mexican War Battlefield* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997); Douglas D. Scott and William J. Hunt, Jr., *The Civil War Battle at Monroe's Crossroads, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, a Historical Archeological Perspective* (Prepared for the U.S. Army, XCIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, Fort Bragg, NC, by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Technical Assistance and Partnership Section, Southeast Archeological Center, Tallahassee, FL, 1998); Christopher D. Adams, Diane E. White, and David M. Johnson, *Last Chance Canyon, 1869 Apache/Cavalry Battlesite, Lincoln National Forest, New Mexico* (Alamogordo, NM: Lincoln National Forest Heritage Program, 2000); J. Brett Cruse, Patricia A. Mercado-Allinger, Douglas D. Scott, and Pamela Folds, *The Red River War: Battle Sites Project, Phase I* (Texas Historical Commission, 2000); Douglas D. Scott, "Identifying the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre Site Through Archeological Reconnaissance," in *Site Location Study, Sand Creek Massacre Project,* Vol. 1 (Denver: National Park Service, Intermountain Region, 2000): 71-136; William B. Lees, Douglas D. Scott, and C. Vance Haynes, "History Underfoot: The Search for Physical Evidence for the 1868 Attack on Black Kettle's Village," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 79:2 (Oklahoma Historical Society, 2001): 158-181.

3 Melissa Connor and Douglas D. Scott, "Metal Detector Use in Archaeology: An Introduction," *Historical Archaeology* 32:4 (Society for Historical Archaeology, 1998): 73-82.

4 William B. Lees, "When the Shooting Stopped, the War Began," in *Look to the Earth: Historical Archaeology and the Civil War*, Clarence R. Geir and Susan Winter Frye, editors, (University of Tennessee Press, 1995): 31-59. William B. Lees, Archaeology of the Mine Creek Civil War Battlefield, manuscript (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 1998).

5 Lumir F. Buresh, *October 25th and the Battle of Mine Creek* (Kansas City, MO: Lowell Press, 1978).

6 Ibid.

7 William B. Lees, Archaeology of the Mine Creek Civil War Battlefield, manuscript (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 1998).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Canisters are projectiles filled with metal balls and sawdust that burst open when shot from a cannon.

11 William B. Lees, Archaeology of the Mine Creek Civil War Battlefield, manuscript (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 1998).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

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Photos by the author.